

### Wolf Hall, a review

James Walton

- 1 If the fact that BBC Two has managed to squeeze the 1,100 pages of Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* and its sequel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, into only six hours of television led you to expect just another fast-paced TV romp through Tudor history, then you were in for rather a surprise. With all the advance fuss, the opening episode might have been forgiven for trying too hard in the quest to make a big and obvious splash. In the event, what we got was something far more subtle and unhurried – but that still ended up packing an impressive dramatic punch.
- 2 The director, Peter Kosminsky, is best-known for contemporary political dramas (*The Government Inspector*, *The Promise*) that generally attract the word "controversial". Yet, while the politics here are easily as juicy as anything in the modern world, he observes the conventions of historical drama with some care. Episode one even began in the classic way: with a caption explaining the background ("It is 1529. Henry VIII is on the throne...") and then some blokes on horseback galloping across the countryside as a series of impeccably starchy actors' names appeared on screen.
- 3 The gallopers' destination was York Place, where they'd come on the king's behalf to remove the Seal of Office from Cardinal Wolsey (Jonathan Pryce). A surprisingly twinkly cardinal took the news with benevolent resignation – until a shadowy figure showed up at his side and whispered into his ear that, legally, the Seal could only be given to the Master of the Rolls. "Did you know that?" Wolsey asked him admiringly when the men retired, temporarily defeated. "Or did you make it up?"
- 4 The whisperer in question was Thomas Cromwell (Mark Rylance), who as we know – not least, thanks to Hilary Mantel – rose from the backstreets of Putney to wield a degree of power that today's politicians could never dream of. Yet, one of the huge strengths of the first episode was that, at this stage, Cromwell couldn't dream of it either. There was no nonsense here about a man of destiny, marked down for greatness. Instead, as the programme mirrored Mantel's own time-shifts with an artful if slightly confusing set of flashbacks, he spent much of the time being entirely peripheral to the grand affairs of state happening off-stage.
- 5 It's often said the test of a good actor is that you can tell what the character is thinking. What makes Rylance's performance so riveting, though, is that you can't. Why, for example, did Cromwell stay so loyal to Wolsey even after the cardinal's failure to get Henry a divorce had made him an enemy of the king? Was it simply out of decency, or was he cunningly playing the longer game? What, in short, was he up to, and why? Again, it seems a key strength of *Wolf Hall* that we might never get a definitive answer, just a series of intriguing possibilities.

- 6 This mysteriousness was also given more literal form by the fact that we had to peer at many of the scenes through candlelight, which made them suitably shadowy, faintly sinister and — let's face it — quite hard to see. Even so, one undoubted gift that Cromwell did possess was the ability to disconcert whoever he was talking to, however powerful. At times, he felt almost like a Tudor version of Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, complete with laconic wisecracks and a distinct lack of respect for his supposed betters.
- 7 He even employed the same tactics when, with around five minutes to go, he (and we) finally got to meet Henry and cheekily mocked his wars in France. Fortunately, like everybody else, Henry (Damian Lewis) seemed tickled to be so comprehensively wrong-footed, and as he walked away from the king, Cromwell permitted himself a telling little smile.
- 8 And in a way, this was a moment that summed up the whole programme: its willingness to allow a slow build; its defiant refusal to get overexcited by either its own material or its own hype; and, above all, its vivid sense that what we now regard as history (and therefore as somehow inevitable) is something that once unfolded — and unfolded uncertainly — in real time. My guess, and I don't think I'm going out on a limb here, is that future episodes might contain events that are more conventionally thrilling. 24, as a means of setting the scene, drawing us deep into the Tudor world and presenting us with a winningly ambiguous central character, it's hard to see how this one could have been done much better.

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